

Here's the beef It's important to know what's behind the grass-fed beef label. **Grass fed** means that from birth to slaughter, cattle feast on nothing but grass, grazing in the summer and consuming harvested and stored hay in the winter. **Grass finished** generally means that cattle start out grazing on grass but spend their last months being fattened with corn or other grains. Thousand Hills cattle are not treated with hormones or the antibiotics often necessary to sustain a grain diet. Thousand Hills farmers spray their grasses with fortifying natural minerals, but do not use synthetic pesticides or herbicides.



Cows raised under the Thousand Hills Cattle Co. label, a consortium of 20 Midwestern farmers, graze on a variety of grasses.

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LIQUID ASSETS

The spirit of the Irish deserves to be tasted

• In the past decade, Irish whiskey has developed a range, quality and selection better than ever.

By ERIC ASIMOV • New York Times

First of all, let me extend a pre-emptive apology. It's not right that the issue of Irish whiskey comes up only in the days leading up to St. Patrick's Day. For a whiskey with such a pedigree to be consigned to the category of ethnic celebration — not that there's anything wrong with that, as Jerry Seinfeld used to say — pays dutiful lip service to a spirit that deserves much better.

Although no one can prove the legend that whiskey was invented in Ireland 1,000 years ago or so, it's a fair bet that you could stir things up in a Dublin bar by arguing the point. Scotland may have an equal claim as the originator of whiskey, and may have the upper hand commercially today, but 200 years ago it was Irish whiskey that held sway among connoisseurs — outside Scotland, of course.

What happened? In the 19th century the Irish whiskey industry was shaken by famine, abstinence movements and new technology that undercut Irish distilling methods. It survived, but nearly died in the 20th century, when Prohibition, conflict with Britain and war eliminated its most important export markets.

Yet from its nearly moribund state, the Irish whiskey industry has rebounded in the past decade. Today the selection, range and quality of Irish whiskeys are probably better than they have been in most people's memory.

In its purest form, Irish whiskey has a fresh, lightly fruity, almost meadow-like aroma and flavor that is entirely its own.

Irish: More are single-malts. **T2**►
Recipe: Chocolate Whiskey Cake. **T2**



Have you herd?

• Grass-fed beef is a lean, tasty alternative to traditionally raised beef. Todd Churchill is at the front of the growing trend with his Thousand Hills Cattle Co., and more than a dozen farms are following suit.

By RICK NELSON • rdnelson@startribune.com

Ask Todd Churchill for the key to his growing business, and he will answer in a single word: grass. ¶ "It's the key to everything we do," he said. "Growing grass is a lost art." ¶ Churchill isn't in the sod industry. He's the owner of Thousand Hills Cattle Co., an upstart producer of premium quality grass-fed beef. The premise is disarmingly simple: Create a breeding and feeding framework that produces premium beef, then apply that model to a network of family farms. It's a wonderful win-win-win proposition: Consumers get top-quality beef. Farmers, squeezed by the commodity market, pull in top dollar. And the environment recuperates from the perils of modern agriculture.

"There is a lot of talk about how growing grass and grazing is better for the environment than growing row crops and running feed lots," Churchill said. "But it's all theoretical until you can create an economic market for grass. The way you do that is by harvesting it with cattle."

Churchill, an Illinois native and the child of farmers, landed in Minnesota via St. Olaf College in Northfield. After nearly a decade as a financial consultant to small businesses, he ran across an article in the New York Times Magazine, and his career took off in an entirely different direction.

The story was "This Steer's Life" by Michael Pollan, the Kafka-like tale of a cow's life from calf to kitchen. Pollan used the saga of Steer No. 534 to illustrate everything wrong with the way America has come to produce beef. A year later, in 2003, Churchill had a cattle company, named for the passage in the Book of Psalms where mankind is reminded that while they may be stewards of the "cattle upon a thousand hills," the animals belong to God.

Beef continues: Grass-fed beef tastes like the stuff mom used to cook. **T5** ►

3 from region have a shot at winning Pillsbury Bake-Off

By AL SICHERMAN
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When the winner of the \$1 million grand prize at the 42nd Pillsbury Bake-Off is announced Wednesday morning in Orlando, Fla., three women from our region will be there, holding their breaths.

The \$1-million grand prize could go to the Sweet 'n Smoky Chicken Wraps prepared by Patrice Hurd, Bemidji, Minn., the Pineapple-Black Bean Enchiladas by Mary Iovinelli Buescher, Bloomington, or the Fudge-Strawberry Cream Torte from Rebecca Kremer, Hudson, Wis. Or it could be won by one of the other 97 finalists from around the country.

Finalists map out route to recipe



PINEAPPLE-BLACK BEAN ENCHILADAS

• From: Mary Iovinelli Buescher, Bloomington



FUDGE-STRAWBERRY CREAM TORTE

• From: Rebecca Kremer, Hudson, Wis.



SWEET 'N SMOKY CHICKEN WRAPS

• From: Patrice Hurd, Bemidji, Minn.

TWO-THIRDS (66) OF THE FINALISTS ARE EMPLOYED OUTSIDE THE HOME; 20 ARE FULL-TIME HOMEMAKERS, 11 ARE RETIRED AND THREE ARE STUDENTS.

To have the grand prize land in Pillsbury's back yard would certainly take the cake, and it has happened five times in the contest's 55-year history.

The last big winner from our neck of the woods was Julie Bengtson, Bemidji, whose Chocolate Praline Layer Cake took the \$40,000 grand prize in Bake-Off 33 in 1988. (The prize was increased from \$25,000 to \$40,000 in 1980.) Nobody from around here has won the grand prize since it was increased to \$1 million in 1996.

We could be due.

Pillsbury continues: Two contestants have experience; one is a novice. **T4** ►